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FOCH OF FRANCE, THE D'ARTAGNAN OF THE WAR

There Is Something in Him That Is Steadfast and Something More That Is Relentless. But His Relentlessness Is for the Germans. For His Own Men He Is a Father. The War He Makes Is a Formidable Thing—for the Enemy

By FRED B. PITNEY

His Gray Eyes Bore Through You and Burn You Up and Smile on You All at the Same Time. His Military Genius Is Summed in This: "He Is Great in His Vision of the Next Hour." One Thinks of Thomas at Chickamauga

The accompanying interview with General Foch, now in command of operations on the Somme, was held up by the French military authorities because of a rule, then strictly enforced, against the mention of any general except Joffre. The interview was granted after the French offensive in Champagne and Artois, but now that the spotlight of events has turned dramatically upon General Foch, it is more timely than when written.

"GENERAL FOCH," I remarked to a "personality" in Paris, "has become the most interesting man in France. He is more interesting even than General Joffre, because even less is known about him."

"General Foch," said the personality, "is the great general the war has produced in France. He has intuition and the power of divination. He is great in his instant grasp of a situation, his perception of the needs, his vision of the next hour. General Joffre is his warmest admirer.

"He has never received a newspaperman," the personality added regretfully.

A week later I stood in the reception hall of a small chateau "somewhere in the north of France" with five other correspondents. We were on the way to the Artois front and as a preliminary were to be made welcome at headquarters. Whose headquarters was not particularly important. Those of us who had been to the front before understood that it was a part of the routine. When our automobiles rolled up to this chateau it had not looked sufficiently interesting to induce us to get out in the rain until we were told that the programme required it.

I have seen brigade headquarters where there was far more display. There was no fuss and feathers here. No orderlies galloped up on smoking steeds. No mud-splashed dispatch-riders came on snorting motorcycles. A single sentry stood at the gate. Thirty foot of gravelled drive led to a plain oaken door in an unornamented red brick wall. If it had not been for the sentry, the very obvious silence would have led one to expect a "To Let" sign on the door.

Our guide rang the bell beside the door and we were admitted to an oak panelled reception hall about twenty feet square. In the centre was a billiard table covered with brown linen, while at one side was an unpainted yellow pine table, on which lay a copy of Kipling's "Jungle Book" in French. Evidently it was an orderly's desk. On the opposite side of the hall were two doors on one of which was pinned a piece of cardboard on which was printed, "Le Bureau du General."

The sign was our first hint that we had arrived "somewhere." We laid our overcoats and hats on the billiard table and I asked where we were. Our guide put his finger to his lips—I had spoken too loud—and whispered:

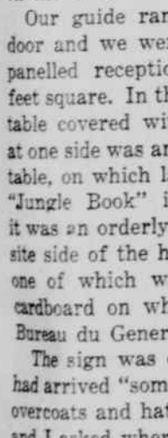
"General Foch's headquarters."

That little sign fascinated me after that, but I knew we would not see inside of the room. We would be received by the chief of staff.

Our guide disappeared. There was some hurried going back and forth by half a dozen officers. One went into the general's bureau. We waited in silence. Five minutes later our guide opened the door of the general's bureau and said.

"Gentlemen, the general is ready to receive you."

And we did the perfectly unexpected thing of filing into the bureau of General Foch. Except for ourselves, our captain from the great general staff and our guide from his own staff, who made the introductions, General Foch was the only person in the room — another very unusual thing in being received at headquarters. Indeed, severe simplicity was the most pronounced characteristic of everything connected with General Foch.



His bureau was a long room furnished with one large flat-topped table covered with maps, and one small flat-topped desk on which were a plain glass inkwell and one red handled penholder. Four straight backed chairs stood against the walls besides the one at the desk. There was a wall telephone, and all the walls were covered with large scale maps, in some of which small flagged pins were stuck. We only got just inside the door, where we stood in a close drawn semicircle, while the general stood at the near end of the long table, with his back to the windows, and eyed us.

He is not tall, five feet six inches in height, but you do not see that until afterward. What you see first is his eye. He has a large, well shaped head, rather thin iron gray hair and a broad, high forehead. His gray eyes, set wide apart, bore through you and burn you up and smile on you, all at the same time. His nose is large, his mouth wide and straight, and his fiercely benevolent iron gray mustache first comes down over the corners of his mouth and then points straight up at his eyes. His chin is massive from any point of view.

When he received us he wore a plain black tunic with gold stripes on the shoulders, red breeches with broad black braid on the side seams and black boots. He is entitled to have three stars on his cuffs, but I did not see them. A long band of the ribbons of many decorations was pinned on his left breast, and under it was the great star of the Grand Cross of the Legion of Honor. He stood for the most part with his left hand in his breeches pocket and his right foot slightly advanced. There was a noticeable absence of gesticulation.

General Foch, like General Joffre, comes from the Pyrenees. He is gallant, picturesque and picaresque, extraordinary, fascinating—D'Artagnan and Turenne.

There were in our party four Americans, one of whom had recently been in Russia; one Spaniard and one from Holland. General Foch's usual greeting to generals, sous-lieutenants and civilians alike is: "Good morning. It is a fine day. Goodby." When we were presented to him he surveyed us briefly, inquired where we were from, studied us again, and for some reason of which I have been able to get no satisfactory explanation decided to talk. To us Americans he expressed his pleasure that all true American opinion was with the Allies. To the Spaniard he spoke of the beauty of Madrid. But Holland and Russia interested him most.

"If France should be defeated," he said, "Holland will be wiped out, but if France wins Holland will be saved. Holland has built up a colossal commercial marine and Germany wants Holland's commerce and her position on the sea. If Germany wins, she will kick Holland aside as a man kicks a stone out of his way in the road. Germany and Holland are in the position of the big fish and the little fish. The big fish eat the little fish, and Germany would find Holland a very delicate morsel indeed."

Turning to Russia, he said: "Russia has passed the critical moment. Like all the Allies, she has experienced a great lack of munitions; there was a day when she was 2,000,000 rifles short, but now all this is remedied. She is getting well armed, with plenty of munitions, cannon and rifles, and she is ready to go ahead. Russia, with her population of 160,000,000, can never be wiped out. She will come back in wave after wave until victory is hers."

We, of course, wanted to hear him talk on France, but we could not give the lead; we had to follow him or wait for him. After he had spoken of Russia he drew back again to the end of the table and it seemed that the meeting was over and we were about to be dismissed, but, instead, he began to speak on France.

"We began the war," he said, "as every one now knows, with only a small proportion of the munitions required. But as soon as a little experience showed what was needed our factories and people got to work, and they have done wonders in meeting the calls on them. Our supplies and munitions, field artillery and heavy artillery have been increased tremendously, and though in fifteen and one-half months of warfare, with heavy cannonading every day, there has been an expenditure of ammunition beyond the imagination of any man, we are now in a position to meet all demands.

"The recent battles in Artois and the Champagne have shown that we can cut the German lines, go through them and drive them back as we please, when the time comes that our plans have fixed."

The circumstances compel me to make only a very small selection from what General Foch had to say, but there was a matter-of-fact definiteness about the last statement and the line of reasoning that accompanied it that put it outside the realm of discussion, and when I recall this meeting with General Foch the picture my mind most dwells upon is of him at that moment. He stood facing us in that so characteristic attitude, with his right foot a little in advance, his left hand in his pocket and his right hand dragging upward the point of his gray mustache, and there was in his expression a mixture of pleased recollection, happy anticipation and grim determination.

One must think of D'Artagnan when one thinks of General Foch; but one thinks, also, of Thomas at Chickamauga and Grant in the Wilderness. There is something in him that is steadfast and something more that is relentless. But his relentlessness is for the Germans. For his own men he is a father.

"Foch is the Kaiser kind," I heard an officer say in Paris. "He believes that a battle cannot be won without sacrificing men."

I repeated the remark to a member of General Foch's staff and asked him if it were true.

"Sacrificing Germans," the officer replied. "General Foch does not sacrifice his own men. I will tell you a story.

"In another sector, during a battle not long ago, the colonel of a certain regiment that was supposed to advance in conformation with the general plan telephoned to the regiments on his right and left and found that they had not advanced because the wire entanglements in front of them had not been cut. So this colonel remained in his trenches. A little later the brigade commander telephoned to know if the colonel had advanced. He explained why he had not—because the regiments on either side of him could not move, and if he went forward he would be in the air and unsupported.

"'You must go forward,' said the general. 'It is orders.'

"The colonel telephoned again to the regiments beside him and remained in his trenches. Once more the brigade commander ordered him forward.

"'It is orders,' the general said again.

"A third time the colonel was ordered forward and he had to take his men out of the trenches. He took them to the crest of the hill in front of them, where they waited all day for the others to join them, and at nightfall retired to their trenches. Although this was accomplished so skilfully that there was but a single casualty—one corporal wounded, whom the colonel, himself, carried back to the trenches on his shoulders—a great risk had been run for a wasted movement.

"Such a performance would be inconceivable under General Foch. He would have known whether the wire was cut in front of all the regiments, and the orders for that regiment to advance would never have been given unless the others could have supported it. General Foch makes war a formidable thing for the enemy, but his men know that he never sacrifices them needlessly."

"Is it true," I asked, "that in a battle he always goes on the field himself?"

"It is ridiculous," replied the officer, "to think that General Foch would be so unconscientious as to go to a loophole in the first line trenches just to see fifty yards of Germans."

During a battle General Foch is to be found in the big room at his headquarters. He stands before one of those large scale maps with a pencil in his hand and the telephone receiver at his ear. His staff stands in a semicircle behind him. There is perfect silence, and the only movement is of the general's pencil on the map as he follows the battle and ponders the detail of the district where the fighting is in progress.

He has two gestures. One is persistent and constant. It is the hand rising to the end of his gray mustache, not to fondle it, but to tug at it slowly and strongly. The other is seen when the door opens softly and an officer enters on tiptoe.

"Where have you been?" the general asks abruptly.

When he is answered one hand raises his pencil to the point on the map and the other makes a quick, backward, underhand sweep, close to his body and high up, as though he were impatiently brushing a speck from his tunic under his arm.

The officer backs into the semicircle and awaits the next demand.

"What did you see?"

And again, when he has replied, he is brushed back to await a new order.

There are many apochryphal stories of General Foch floating around the Paris cafés, as, for example, the two that I have given, that he is the "Kaiser kind," and that "he always goes on the field of battle" instead of being where he belongs; but this is a true picture of General Foch during a battle as he is seen by the members of his staff.

Another story no less interesting is the one of his report at the Battle of the Marne: "My right is crushed. My left is in retreat. I am attacking with my centre." He did, in fact, have something of that general nature to report, but it was not quite so much on the veni, vidi, vici order. General Foch has illustrated with a dozen matches, now preserved as a cherished souvenir, what really happened at the Battle of the Marne.

His army faced von Bulow and the Prussian Guard was opposite his centre. The 42d Division formed General Foch's extreme left. Three times the Prussian Guard forced back the French centre. Then General Foch, breaking all the rules, withdrew the 42d Division from the firing line in the full tide of battle, called on General Franchet d'Esperey to fill the gap, and, marching the 42d half way across the field behind the line, drove it into the flank of the Prussian Guard, broke the German centre and sent von Bulow flying in retreat.

My friend, the "personality" in Paris, said of General Foch: "He is great in his vision of the next hour." Nothing could better illustrate that vision than the Battle of the Marne.

Another thing in which he is great is his memory. He gave a good example of that quality at the beginning of the war, when a sous-lieutenant of the reserve was ordered to report for

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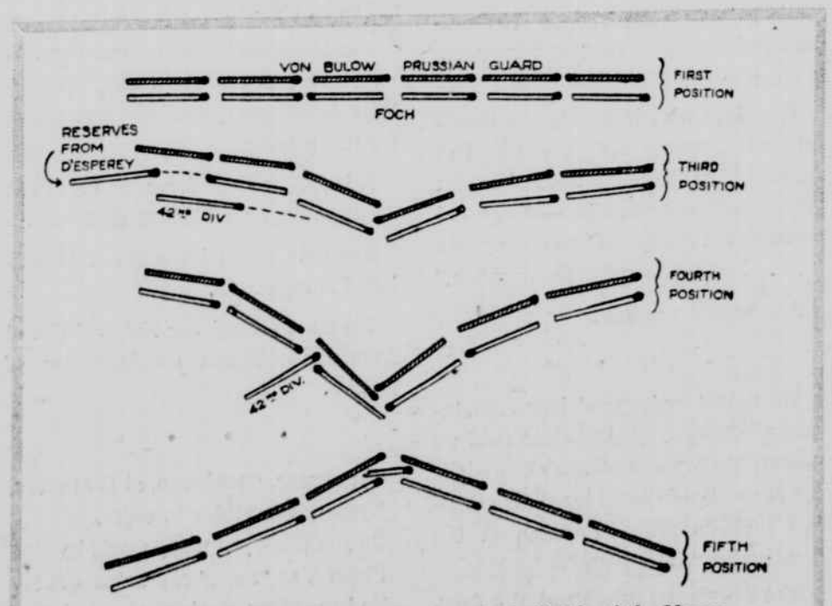

General Foch's Match Stick Diagram of the Battle of the Marne.